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ABSTRACT

Paradoxically, for reasons both philosophical and practical, public libraries are uniquely positioned to assist the 72 million Americans who, by virtue of being illiterate or marginally literate, are not ordinarily library users. A formal link between libraries and literacy can be traced back to the 1920s when the American Library Association (ALA) established its Commission on Library and Adult Education. This action was based on the proposition that education is a lifelong process--and that libraries constitute an alternative education system. In the 1960s and 1970s, libraries began to focus on groups in need of special services and established outreach services. Public libraries moved into their present position of leadership in the national literacy movement. Service delivery in an individual library depends on size, staff, location, budget, and sensitivity to the problem of illiteracy in its community. California has one of the most highly developed models of service delivery. Roughly a dozen other states have mounted significant statewide library-based literacy activities and coalitions. Examples of emerging patterns in libraries include collaboration and cooperation between libraries and literacy organizations, prevention by breaking the cycle of illiteracy, and development of reading collections with appropriate reading materials. ALA's priorities are public awareness, federal support, and the role of librarians as advocates. (YLB)

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ADULT LITERACY: PROGRAMS • PLANNING • ISSUES

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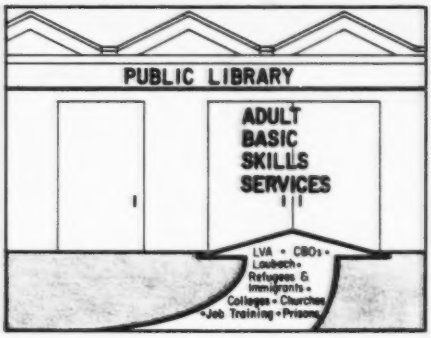
# LIBRARIES & LITERACY




Public libraries have a distinct and potentially powerful role to play in the nation's struggle against adult illiteracy. There are 15,000 of them threaded throughout the American landscape. In most places, they are as familiar as the church, the school, or the local bank. They are so familiar that we tend to take them for granted, forgetting that with their purpose of providing free and open access to knowledge for all persons, they are one of the most remarkable and fundamental public services in the nation.

They are all the more remarkable in that they are not required by law. Yet few communities are without library service. Most citizens, in fact, vote to tax themselves to support their libraries and strong support surfaces to defend them when their existence is threatened. (Approximately 79 percent of public library financing comes from local property taxes.) A 1978 Gallup poll of library usage found that more than half of all Americans over the age of 18 are library users, or at least visit their public library during the course of a year.

Paradoxically, for reasons both philosophical and practical, public libraries are uniquely positioned to assist the 72 million Americans who, by virtue of being illiterate or marginally literate, are not ordinarily library users.

A formal link between libraries and literacy can be traced back to the 1920's when the American Library Association (ALA), with some 40,000 member libraries and librarians, established its Commission on

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# LIBRARIES & LITERACY

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Library and Adult Education. This action was based on the proposition that education is a lifelong process that does not stop after the completion of formal schooling–and that libraries constitute an alternative education system.

## Reaching Out

In the mid-60's and early 70's, this proposition assumed a new force. Traditionally, clients of public libraries were drawn from the educated public, and chiefly from the white middle class. But stimulated by the climate of the Great Society and the new wave of social programs, libraries began to study their communities to identify groups in need of special services: the illiterate, the unemployed, the elderly, the handicapped, and immigrants and refugees isolated by language and cultural differences. Increased sensitivity to these potential patrons led to a focus on moving out beyond library walls to find and serve them. Like other educational and social agencies, libraries came to view these groups not as the unreachable but the unreached.

This soon led to the establishment of store-front libraries, mobile vans, learning and reading centers, and extension services to correctional and other institutions, as well as other innovative trends in library service. Some residents of Brooklyn, for example, recall the Three B's Program of the Brooklyn Public Library, which deposited non-returnable paperbacks in bars, beauty parlors, and barber shops to familiarize and lure the customers to their own doors.

To ensure that such activities would continue, and that librarians themselves would have access to the continuing education and technical assistance they would need to do effective outreach work, in 1973 the ALA set up an Office for Library Outreach Services.

### ALA Leadership

Notable developments under the aegis of that Office have moved public libraries into their present position of leadership in the national literacy movement. In 1977 the ALA published *Literacy and the Nation's Libraries*, a guidebook designed to stimulate and help librarians set up literacy programs. As Robert Wedgeworth, ALA's former executive director notes, "The publication of the manual demonstrated that eradicating illiteracy had become a top priority of the ALA–and remains so, as evidenced by its further activities."

Between 1979 and 1981, an ALA project trained nearly 1,000 librarians in techniques for conducting literacy programs.

In addition, realizing that its own resources, and those of individual literacy groups, were not sufficient for the task, it set about to organize the Coalition for Literacy, in which it became an active member. The Coalition is a group of 11 national organizations, each with a distinct role in the delivery of literacy information and services, and this was the first time that the major groups concerned with illiteracy had joined forces to tackle the problem on a national level.

In January 1985, after three years of planning, the Coalition launched its national, multi-media campaign–in cooperation with the Advertising Council, a national telephone referral service known as CONTACT Literacy Center, and a still-growing number of special state referral hotlines. (The campaign is still young, but already CONTACT has had a response rate of about 30,000 telephone inquiries, an estimated 10 percent of all calls being received nationally. Of these, 73 percent have come from potential volunteer tutors and about 18 percent from potential students. As of last October, some $8 million in space and time had been generated by the ads placed on radio and television and in consumer and business publications.)

### Service Delivery

What a single library can do on behalf of literacy training usually depends on its size, staff, location, budget, and whether it is sensitive to and interested in the problem of illiteracy in its community.

California has one of the most highly developed models of service delivery. The state library agency has made literacy a major program goal and since January 1984 has given more than $5 million from state and Library Services and Construction Act funds to develop literacy activities in individual library systems. As a result, 46 new library literacy programs have already been set up. Numerous other libraries have indicated their desire to initiate similar programs and additional funds are being requested by the state library to enable more to participate.

Most of the existing literacy programs are supervised by an adult literacy services coordinator in the library system. Each of the 46 libraries, depending on the size of the community, has a full- or part-time staff member assigned specifically to literacy. All conduct tutorial services on site or at other community locations. Some of these have a trainer on their own staff to train volunteer tutors, and some contract with Literacy Volunteers of America or Laubach Literacy for tutor training. Typically, in each of these projects, adults seeking help are interviewed, assessed for placement, and either assigned to a tutor or referred outside to a more appropriate ABE, ESL, or other program. Students learn that help is available through active library public relations campaigns.

Some libraries in addition to those presently conducting literacy programs maintain a stock of literacy materials for students and tutors, made possible through special state literacy collection-development grants. A few of the 46 programs also have literacy-related computer and audio-visual materials. As students advance in their reading skills, they are urged to borrow appropriate reading materials as a way to encourage regular library use in the future.

States without major literacy funding for libraries usually are not able to offer the comprehensive services being developed in California, and most do not themselves provide basic skills instruction. Usually they work as networking agents or as catalysts in the community. They function as a link in the chain of organizations that comprise the literacy field, connecting and collaborating with federal ABE programs, voluntary agencies, community colleges, and other community-based groups. They may help local literacy programs recruit tutors and students, provide space for classes, and try to stock appropriate low-level reading materials. They are effective in this supporting and facilitating role because people trust them and see them as a benevolent presence free of politics or vested interest.

One of the key reasons that libraries are so well positioned to play a larger role in literacy programming is that they already are centers for numerous other community activities. Moreover, they are open evenings and weekends, and offer a friendly environment free of any negative associations with schools or past school failure. For an adult to go to a library is a prestigious act whereas going to an elementary or secondary school for night classes often feels demeaning. Furthermore, for new literates to have acquired the habit of going to a library is desirable in itself because it may lead them to continue reading independently.

However, while the foregoing discussion may seem to suggest a situation of plenty, that is not the case. According to the U.S. Department of Education only half of the 50 states presently have any library literacy programs in operation. CONTACT Literacy Center reports that there are only 467 public libraries countrywide conducting literacy work of one kind or another. So it is clear that the potential of libraries for literacy service is yet to be tapped.

## Emerging Patterns

Spurred by the Ad Campaign and funds from the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA), roughly a dozen states in addition to California have mounted significant statewide library-based literacy activities and coalitions, each state proceeding in its own fashion.

In Oklahoma, for example, the Department of Libraries has launched a program to organize literacy councils in cities across the state, with the goal of making literacy instruction available to 95 percent of the population within 25 miles of their homes. Modest LSCA grants of $1,300 were made to 27 public libraries this past year to help the local councils organize. Already the number has grown to 48 councils and it is expected to increase. A highly successful awareness campaign, which included a literacy message on grocery bags distributed statewide by Safeway Stores at no charge, generated such interest that numerous groups have contacted the State Library to seek a means of involvement.

Among them are the Farmers Union, the Firefighters Association, the Urban League, the American Association of University Professors, the Newspaper Editors Association, and the Department of Human Services. The latter will pay welfare recipients who can read, to teach others who cannot. The State Library provides the training.

Tutor Trainers, Oklahoma Dept. of Libraries

In Illinois, where the State Librarian is also the Secretary of State–and where the State Library, the State Board of Education, and the Governor's Office of

Voluntary Action work closely on problems of illiteracy–a literacy grant program has been signed into law. Recently, $2 million in state funds were granted to some 62 local and regional literacy programs. A distinctive feature of the program is that funds were not confined exclusively to libraries but went also to community colleges, voluntary groups, and community-based organizations.

This departs from the usual practice in which agencies stay within their own jurisdiction, with the Department of Education providing money only for schools or the State Library only for libraries. A board composed of representatives from the State Library, the Board of Education, and the community at large reviewed the proposals and recommended those that were funded.

Space precludes further examples, but other states with significant statewide library initiatives include New York, Ohio, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and New Jersey.

Opening Of New Learning Center, Brooklyn Public Library

### Collaboration

Cooperation between libraries and literacy organizations is clearly a healthy trend that is gathering momentum. In addition to the more conventional forms of cooperation, in Connecticut and New York State the libraries and Literacy Volunteers of America are now working together on proposals to develop state support for library literacy activities. In New York, LVA is also instructing "outreach" librarians assembled in regional and statewide workshops on how to organize and conduct tutorial programs.

One of the top priorities in efforts to expand adult basic skills services nationally is the development of comprehensive statewide planning bodies. In more than half of the states, such groups have been formed or will be shortly. In all of them libraries are an active partner and, in some cases, library leaders were directly responsible for their creation.

Again, Illinois is an excellent new example. The Illinois Literacy Council, which the State Librarian initiated, has in little more than a year made tremendous strides in addition to its recent grants. It has gathered extensive information on the illiteracy problem in the state and identified specific ways to address it. It has undertaken activities to generate public awareness, and started to coordinate all literacy services in the state including those of libraries. It also has set up a literacy hotline to link volunteers and students with programs. And the State Library recently put out *the illinois literacy effort*, a comprehensive report on its activities, its resources, and its detailed plans for moving ahead on several fronts. (The publication is available by contacting Joan Seamon, Literacy Program Coordinator, State Library, 288 Centennial, Springfield, Illinois 62756, or phone (217) 785-1535.)

### Prevention

More attention is gradually being given to programs that seek to break the cycle of illiteracy that passes from non-literate parents to children. One example, Collaborations For Literacy, is an intergenerational project involving Boston University, Literacy Volunteers of Massachusetts, the Boston Public School, the Boston Public Library, and the State Board of Library Commissioners. College Work-Study students are trained and paid to teach functional illiterates how to read. The curriculum is based on the PBS Reading Rainbow videotape and accompanying book series. Once an adult masters a book, he or she must in turn read it to a child, grandchild, or neighbor's child in the library where the tutoring takes place. The child is thereby provided with both an adult role model and a positive image of the library. The program is being adapted for use in South Carolina and Texas.

### Reading Collections

The importance of having appropriate reading materials for adult illiterates cannot be stressed strongly enough. While a few libraries have good collections and some are beginning to develop them, most do not and most have not made the budget allocations that would be needed to do so. Yet, for the low-literate adult, the right reading matter can make the difference between success or failure. Because there is a shortage of relevant and interesting easy-to-read literature for these people, they often are subjected to material designed for children. To them, Dick and Jane stories are embarrassing, boring, and ultimately defeating. Indeed, the adult who has acquired new reading skills often fails to maintain them and reverts back to illiteracy because proper reading material is not available.

Among the bright spots in this area are the collections of the Free Library of Philadelphia, the Spokane Public Library in Washington, and the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. A notable aspect of the Philadelphia program is its annual budget to provide appropriate non-returnable paperbacks to education and social service agencies across the country that work with illiterates. The Spokane library reports that its collection of high-interest, low-level reading materials has always circulated at a rate surpassed only by current best sellers.

Newer programs include "Books By Mail" in Connecticut, which uses an annotated mail order catalog prepared and distributed in cooperation with Literacy Volunteers to make good materials available to students and teachers regardless of where they live in the state. Another program, Project:LEARN in Cleveland, has produced a bibliography for Ohio librarians, "Books for New Adult Readers." Most of the titles are at fifth-grade level or below. A key feature is that the books listed were evaluated by a panel of experts including adult new readers themselves.

### Computers

Computers and other technologies are attracting a growing interest in literacy circles because they provide a tool for reducing the labor-intensive nature of group and one-to-one instruction, and students like and learn effectively with them. In a few public libraries (Jacksonville, New York City, and Milwaukee are good examples), computers are already in use to supplement the traditional teaching patterns. In one promising new development, a pioneering computer-assisted reading approach developed for the U.S. Navy's low-reading recruits is being tested for civilian use at the Mary H. Weir Library in Weirton, West Virginia and at the Enoch Pratt Free Library–under the sponsorship of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science.

### Dual Literacy

A large percentage of the annual increase in persons who cannot read or write competently is comprised of immigrants and refugees from non-English language backgrounds (more than 1.2 million a year). Many, three-fourths of whom are of Latin American or Asian origin, are not literate in their native language. Some libraries are trying to serve these groups in programs that teach English and link them with other community resource agencies. As the non-English-speaking population continues to grow, more libraries will confront the need to serve them.

## Looking Ahead

A top priority of the ALA is to continue its efforts to make the entire country aware of the adult illiteracy problem. "Like drunk driving, child abuse, or other social problems, literacy is beginning to seep into the social consciousness of the country," says Jean Coleman, who heads the ALA's Office of Library Outreach Services. "We must build on that."

Another item on the ALA agenda is to strengthen the support for adult basic education within the federal government. While prevention strategies may work for in-school students, there must be a different approach with those for whom the schools didn't work, or who have left the system and fallen through the cracks. To that end, legislative remedies will be sought by the ALA to strengthen the federal ABE program and expand its eligibility requirements.

Still another focus of ALA concern will be librarians themselves. Some librarians are confused about their role. For some, professional self-image and notions about the proper function of libraries are at odds with fellow librarians seeking a more aggressive role in helping unskilled adult readers. Some are resistant because their budgets are inadequate to support new work, and in the competition for funds literacy activities are thought to be a low priority. These problems of role, attitude, and funding will have to be overcome if libraries are to fully develop their potential in the fight against illiteracy.

Thus, strong and continued leadership from the ALA, as well as from the chief state library agencies in every state, will be essential. In this effort, concerned citizens who are influential policymakers in their own communities can be powerful allies. As trustees of their local libraries or Friends of the Library, these persons are strategically placed to capture the library board's attention and to urge board members to provide leadership.

Finally, library literacy efforts should be significantly aided by the new Title VI of the Library Services and Construction Act which passed Congress in October, 1984. For fiscal 1986, $5 million has been appropriated, with presidential approval expected, for grants of up to $25,000 to local and state libraries for literacy projects. The funds will be used to promote and coordinate volunteer services, purchase materials, and cover the cost involved in using library facilities.